


You Want Me To Do What?

Ltjg. Chris Claybrook

One day in the VTs, I was scheduled for an out-and-in with an instructor who was known for letting students try maneuvers outside of the syllabus. We had flown an uneventful hop to College Station, and when we returned later that night, the weather started to deteriorate. We did our best to hit some open areas in front of us, but we should have picked up an IFR clearance. My instructor decided to stop by Corpus Christi International for a touch-and-go, preceded by a short break at the numbers.

As we approached, he requested the short break, and I noticed that the weather wasn't getting any better. I'd never done a short break, much less at night and in probable IFR

Artwork by John W. Williams
Photo composite by Yvonne Dawson



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conditions. We found a clear area above the numbers, and, as we passed them, I pulled the power to idle and rolled into a 45-degree angle of bank, just as instructed. It went well, and I felt proud as we headed back into the night.

We proceeded to Navy Corpus on top of an overcast layer. The weather at the field was 1,100-foot overcast and 3 miles visibility. I assumed we would find a hole to descend through, but we couldn't even see any lights.

The instructor told me to contact Navy Corpus tower and request another short break. I said, "Sir, I can't really see much up here, should we pick up an approach?"

He replied, "No, once we drop below a thousand feet, we should be able to see well enough to get in."

We were cleared for the short break and descended to 800 feet, but we still couldn't see the ground. Our DME was clicking down, so I knew we had to be getting close. We were both looking for the runway but saw nothing but clouds. Finally, the approach lights came into view directly below us.


"Go!" the instructor said.

"With a short break?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied, more loudly.

Guessing he knew best, I once again pulled power and rolled the aircraft to a 45-degree angle of bank. Both of us lost our visual references as we went back into the clouds. I quickly became disoriented and started stuttering over ICS; I seem to remember him doing the same. We passed through 600 feet still in the turn, and worse, still in the goo. I asked him if he wanted the controls and he responded, slightly panicked, "Can you see anything up there?" I told him I couldn't, as I watched the altimeter pass 500 feet.

Finally, at 400 feet, still in the turn, the runway came back into sight off our left wing. I was still a bit disoriented because the visibility was so poor, but we rolled out onto final and landed. On deck, the instructor said, "Let's keep that between us."

If you don't feel comfortable with what is going on, speak up. I had been a mindless drone, failing to voice my concern or show a bit of assertiveness. At the time, it didn't seem like a big deal. I now understand it was the recipe for disaster. 

Ltjg. Claybrook flies with HC-8.